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PRESENT

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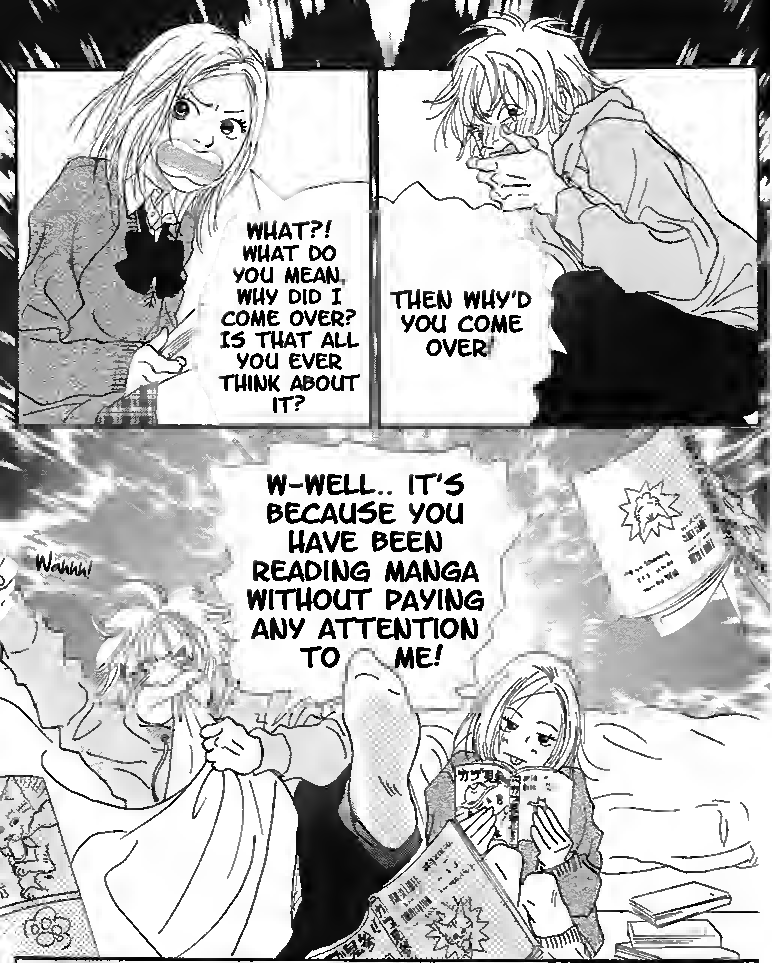
PART 2

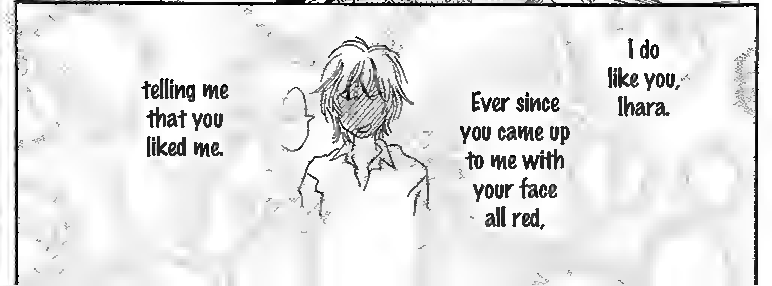
PART 2

"THE CROSSROADS OF MY 18TH YEAR"

It's my first time dating someone who goes to a different school, but things are going pretty well.
I've been dating Ihara since the summer of this year.
He's my fourth boyfriend.
AKI...
DO YOU LIKE ME?

YEAH, SURE.
I LIKE YOU.
I REALLY DO.
UH-HUH.
.....
I SENTENCE YOU THE DEATH PENALTY
I SENTENCE YOU DEATH BY SUFFOCATION! ♡
SKRT
STOP IT! IT'S THAT TIME OF THE MONTH FOR ME!
THUD
WHOA!


WHAT?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WHY DID I COME OVER? IS THAT ALL YOU EVER THINK ABOUT IT?
THEN WHY'D YOU COME OVER!
W-WELL.. IT'S BECAUSE YOU HAVE BEEN READING MANGA WITHOUT PAYING ANY ATTENTION TO ME!
Wahhh!


I do like you, Ihara.
Ever since you came up to me with your face all red,
telling me that you liked me.

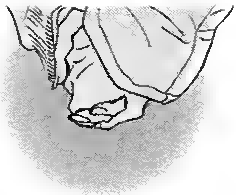
I HEARD YUU-CHAN GOT A JOB WHERE AT?
OH, SOME SPORTS SHOP SOMEWHERE.
THOSE PEEPS WHO ARE IN SCHOOL CLUBS HAVE GOT IT MADE.
WHY DON'T YOU TAKE OVER YOUR PARENTS' BUSINESS?
WHO WOULD WANT TO TAKE UP THIS DUMP OF A PLACE?
AND ANYWAY, MY SIS SAYS SHE IS GOING TO TAKE OVER
HEY, YOU SHOULDN'T CALL IT A "DUMP."
STOP IT!
YOUR LUNGS ARE PROBABLY BLACK BY NOW! BLACK, I TELL YOU!
SO WHAT? MY HEART'S ALREADY BLACK ANYWAY~
Whew!
WHAT IF YOU BECOME EVEN MORE STUPID THAN YOU ALREADY ARE?
OUCH.
YEAH YEAH, I'M AN IDIOT, SO WHAT?
Geez!
IF THAT HAPPENS I'LL JUST BECOME A HOMELESS BUM!

WHAT?
AH, WAIT!
I'LL SEE YOU HOME.
HUH? BUT WHY?
BECAUSE IT'S DARK OUT.
THAT'S OKAY. DON'T BOTHER I ALWAYS GO HOME THIS LATE
I like how his face scrunches up when he smiles. As if he didn't have a care in the world.
いはら生花店
SEE YA!
*IHARA FLOWER SHOP
YEAH, BUT JUST BECAUSE YOU ALWAYS GET HOME SAFE DOESN'T MEAN TODAY WILL BE THE SAME!
OKAY...?
.....
WELL, SEE YA! MY STOP'S OVER THERE.
HUH?
OKAY... SEE YA.
BYEEE!
SO WHAT? HE JUST WANTED TO GO TO 7-11? IS THAT WHAT IT WAS?
Why didn't he just go right out and say it then?

that I stopped reading the books I loved so much (but I still read manga).
I got interested in new things, and hanging out with friends.
High school was fun.
I made a lot more friends,
and I found out about all sorts of stuff I never knew about before.
It was really fun.
IT'S ALMOST CHRISTMAS!
NOT FOR A WHILE, THOUGH
STILL, IT'LL GO BY IN A FLASH
YEAH, PROBABLY
AKI, ARE YOU GOING TO DO SOMETHING WITH IHARA ON THAT DAY?
I'm graduating in three months.
I decided to go to a two-year college.

yo
HEY, IT'S IHARA!
NO I AM——
AHAHA YOU DON'T SOUND TOO EXCITED
UM YEAH
I MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO SEE YOU FOR A WHILE
WHY?
I GOT A PART TIME JOB
WHAT?
WHERE?
OK..?
I GOT THEM TO CRAM ME IN LOTS OF HOURS
AT A KARAOKE PLACE.
It's gonna be killer, I tell ya
Why'd he suddenly take up a job...?
YEAH, SURE—
WHY DON'T YOU COME AND HANG OUT?
♡
BUT WHY THE SUDDEN JOB?
.....
ARE YOU PLANNING ON BUYING SOMETHING?
.....
poke

I... I JUST FELT LIKE WORKING, THAT'S ALL!
THEN WOULDN'T YOU BE BETTER OFF FINDING A MORE... I DON'T KNOW, A JOB YOU CAN TURN INTO A CAREER?
Bullseye...
....
I'll set up a trap.
I DON'T NEED AN EXPENSIVE GIFT, YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT?
I'M SORRY, THAT CAME OUT WRONG—
FINE
IHARA!
Ah.



Ihara,

Even when I call him an idiot, he just laughs.

never gets mad, no matter what I say.

In all honesty, I think he might be the grown up here....

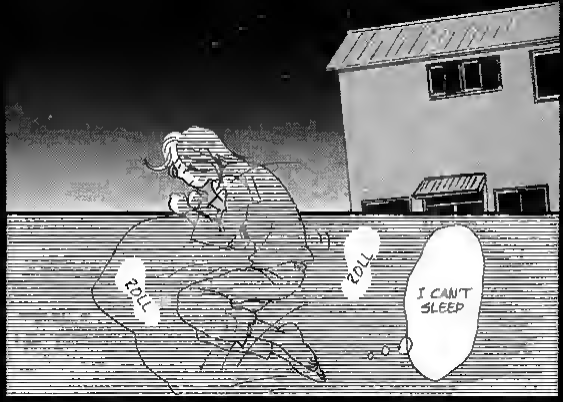
some of the time, anyway.

I wonder

if I like him

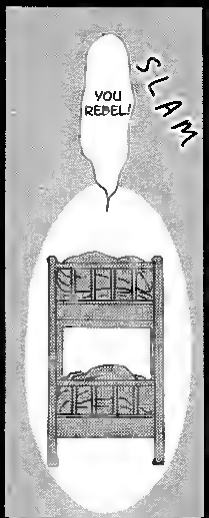
as much as he likes me.

*MANDARIN JUICE


I CAN'T SLEEP
EDLL
EDLL

AKI? WERE YOU ASLEEP? HEY WANNA COME HANG OUT WITH US [redacted] NOW?
THESE PEOPLE FROM G-HIGH ARE HERE. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE MISSING OUT!
AH, YEAH SURE. I'LL BE THERE.

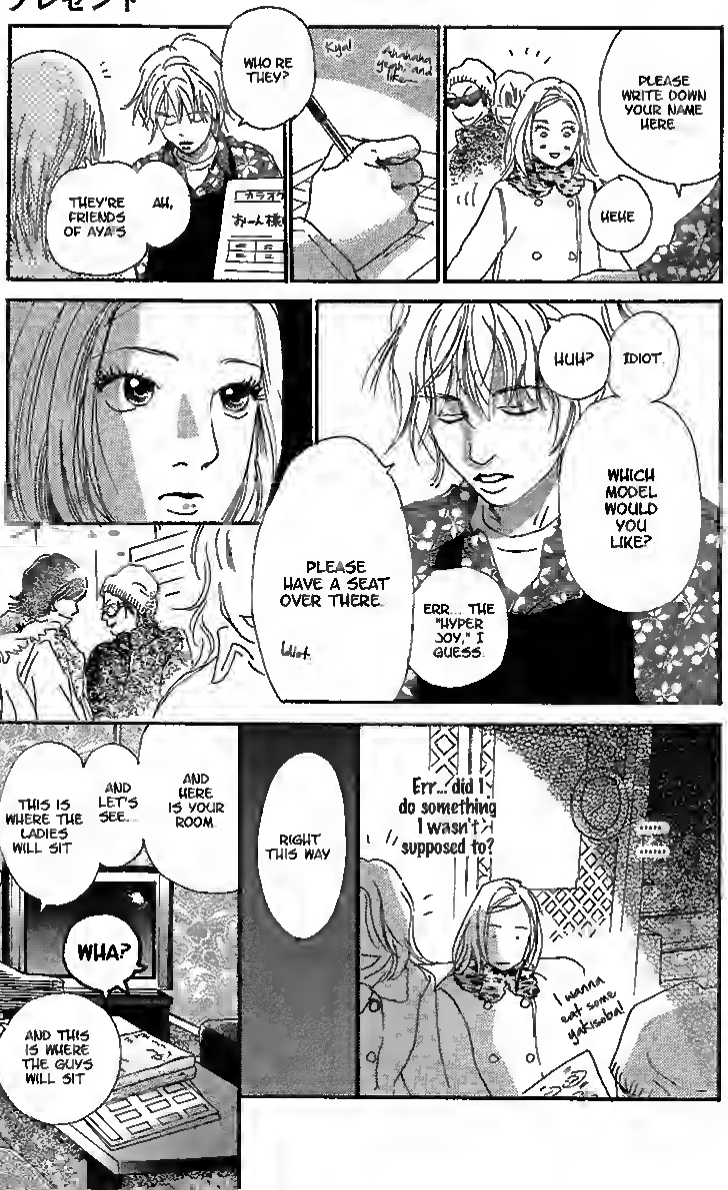
beep
beep
RUSTLE
HELLO?


SLAM
YOU REBEL!

SORRY I'M GOING OUT FOR A BIT
UGHH... BE QUIET. WHAT TIME DO YOU THINK IT IS?

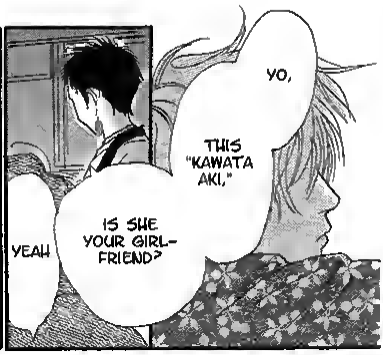
Ah,
WE'RE GOING KARAOKE-ING?
YEAH!
Yay!
Let's go!
Go!
WE'RE GOING TO GO AND VISIT YOUR BOYFRIEND!
No way!
We're in grade 10
You're in grade 12? Seriously?
Ahahaha!
You look so old! I thought!
Is that him?
Is that him?
Hey
It's him!
HELLO—
FOR FIVE, PLEASE!
whoa.

プレゼント


WHO RE THEY?
Kya!
Ahhhhha yeah and like
PLEASE WRITE DOWN YOUR NAME HERE
HEHE
AH, THEY'RE FRIENDS OF AYA'S
HUH?
IDIOT.
WHICH MODEL WOULD YOU LIKE?
ERR... THE "HYPER JOY," I GUESS.
PLEASE HAVE A SEAT OVER THERE.
Wait.
Err... did I do something I wasn't supposed to?
I wanna eat some yakisoba!
RIGHT THIS WAY
AND HERE IS YOUR ROOM.
AND LET'S SEE...
THIS IS WHERE THE LADIES WILL SIT
WHA?
AND THIS IS WHERE THE GUYS WILL SIT

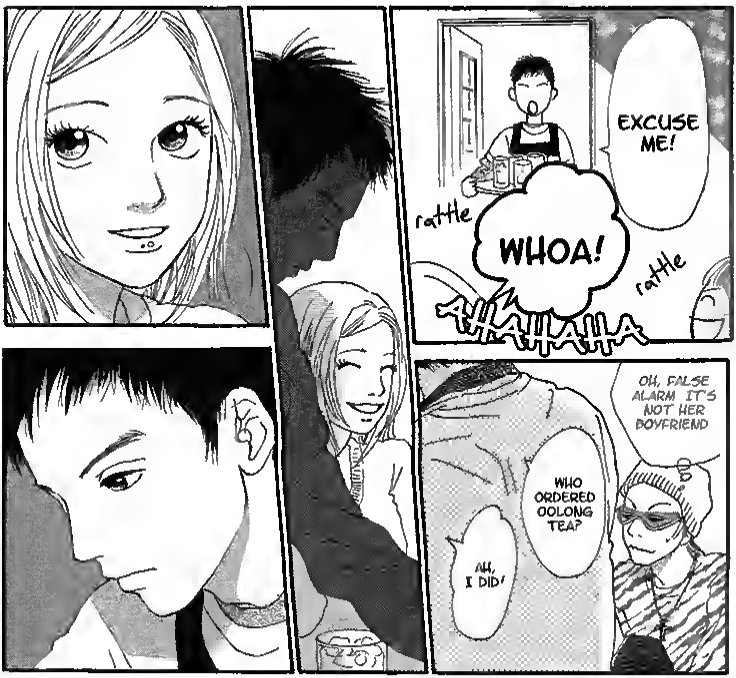
IF YOU DO SWITCH SEATS, WE WILL BE CHARGING YOU THREE TIMES YOUR BILL
AND THIS WILL BE THE MENU
NO SWITCHING SEATS
UM...
ERR OKAY
Okay :P
THUD
ENJOY!
WHAT?!
Ahaha, what a weirdo.
Ahahaha
WHOA, YOU'RE RIGHT!
AHAHAHA
AHAHA HE'S CHECKING IN ON US!
What's his problem!
That's scary!
but I can be stupid at these things...
I'm sorry.
I never mean to
hurt you,

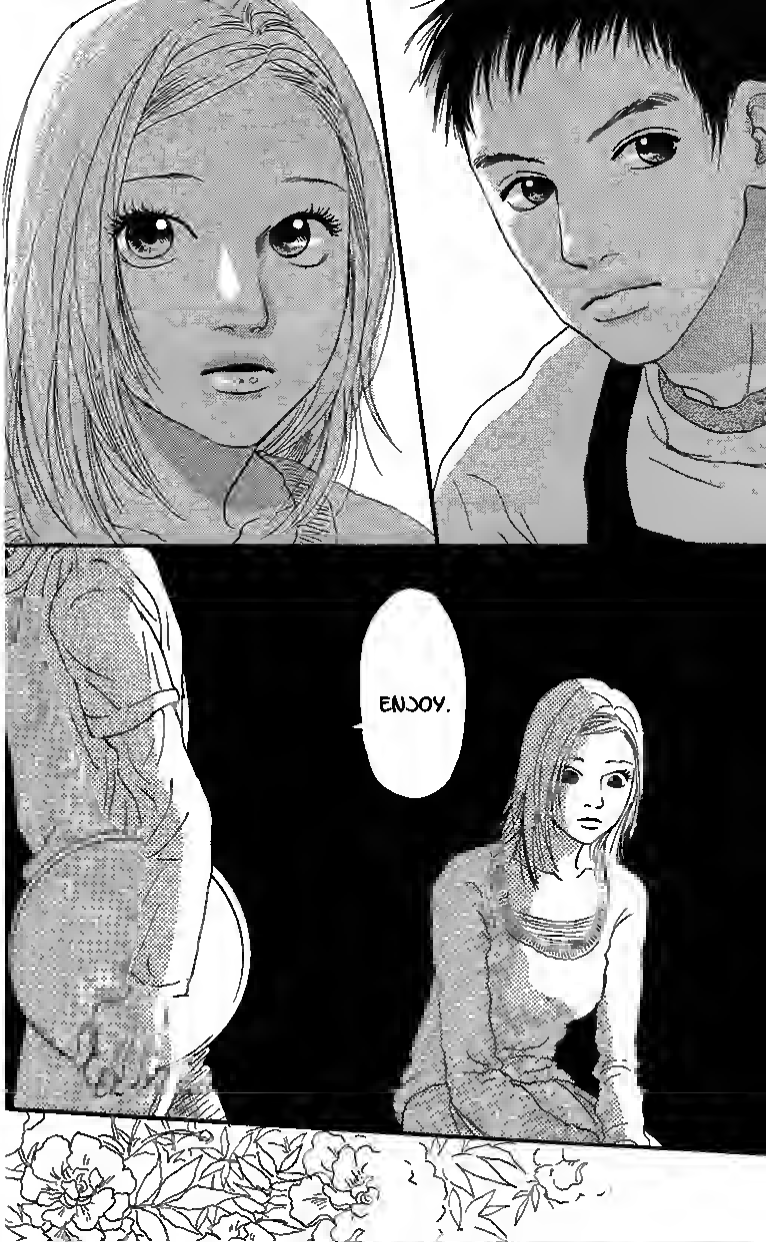
WHAT, WHY?
YOU GO AND CHECK UP ON THEM NEXT
IF I GO TOO MANY TIMES
THEN YOU KNOW, IT'D BE KINDA ANNOYING, AND PLUS IT'S LIKE YEAH, YOU KNOW

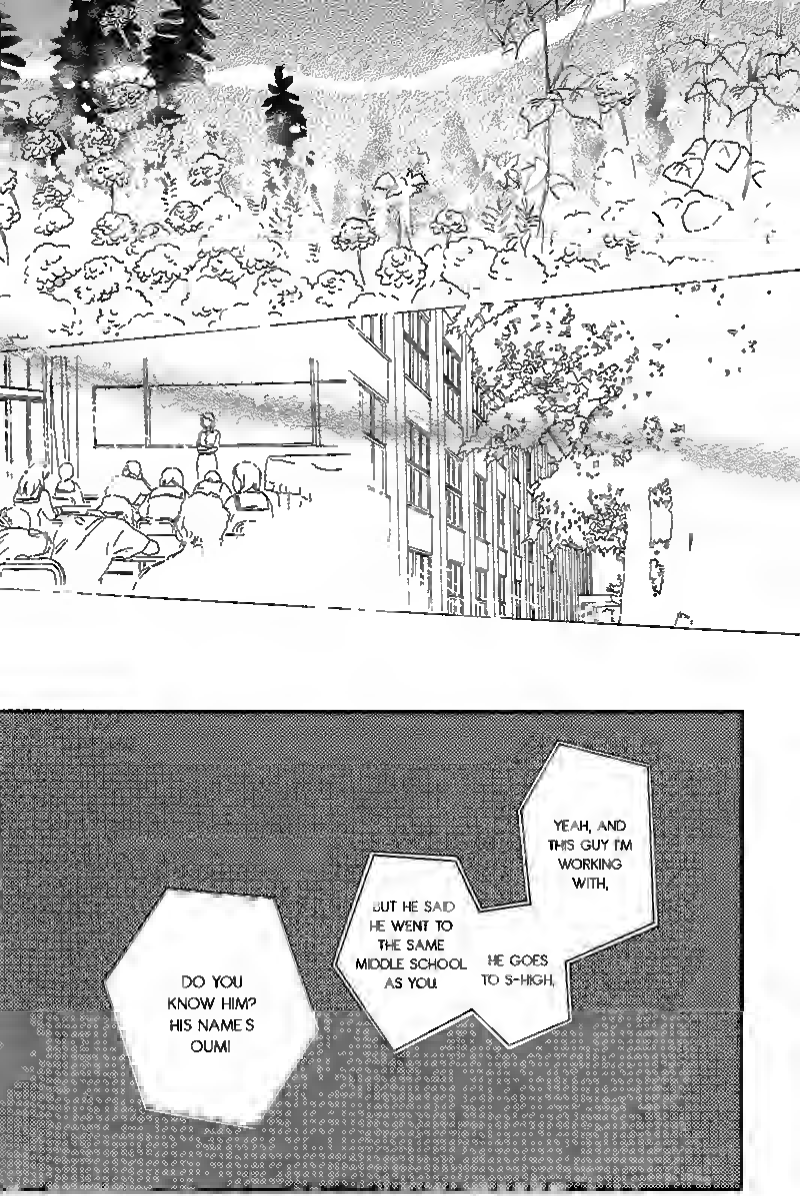


AHAHAHA

Ahahaha




ENJOY.


YEAH, AND THIS GUY I'M WORKING WITH,
HE GOES TO S-HIGH.
BUT HE SAID HE WENT TO THE SAME MIDDLE SCHOOL AS YOU.
DO YOU KNOW HIM? HIS NAME S OUMI

The role call list.

The contact lenses.

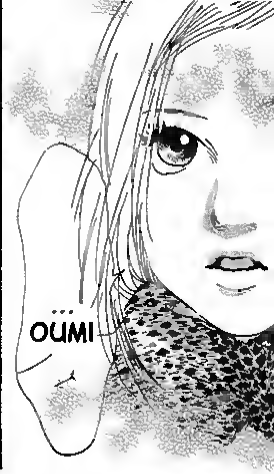
The striped boy briefs.

OH...
YEAH WELL, HE SAID HE CAME BACK IN GRADE 11.
BUT HE SWITCHED SCHOOLS MIDWAY
YEAH, I KNOW HIM
NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, HE USED TO BE THE CLASS REPRESENTATIVE OF OUR CLASS. HOW IS HE?
HE WAS THE ONE WHO BROUGHT YOU GUYS YOUR DRINKS. DID YOU SEE HIM?
.....
..OH REALLY?
I DIDN'T REALIZE IT WAS HIM

The music class.

The school club.

The book review essay.

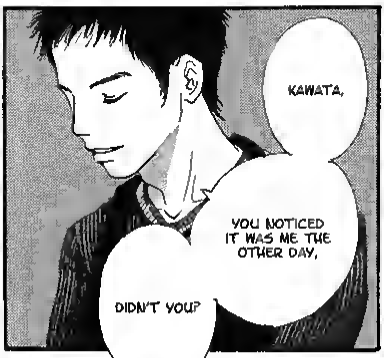


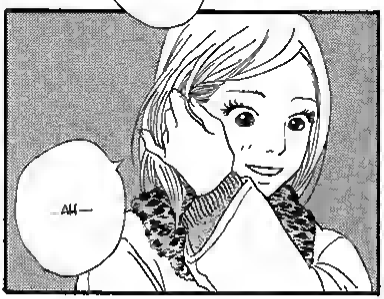
SIGN READS "30 MINUTES FOR 1 PERSON"

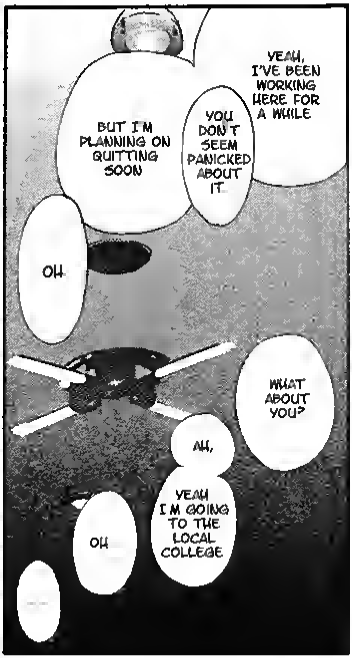
DOES EVERYONE KNOW THAT YOU MOVED BACK HERE? LIKE NODA AND TOKUMARU?
YEAH.
THIS IS NICE! LONG TIME NO TALK!
TOKUMARU'S IN THE SAME CLASS AS ME.
NO WAY!

プレゼント

MAN, I REALIZED I WASN'T CUT OUT FOR IT, YOU KNOW?
ARE YOU STILL DOING LONG JUMP?
OH
AND ANYWAY, I WOULD'VE HAD TO QUIT SOONER OR LATER ANYWAY
YEAH, I UNDERSTAND
ARE YOU GOING TO COLLEGE?
YEAH


KAWATA,
YOU NOTICED IT WAS ME THE OTHER DAY,
DIDN'T YOU?


AH—

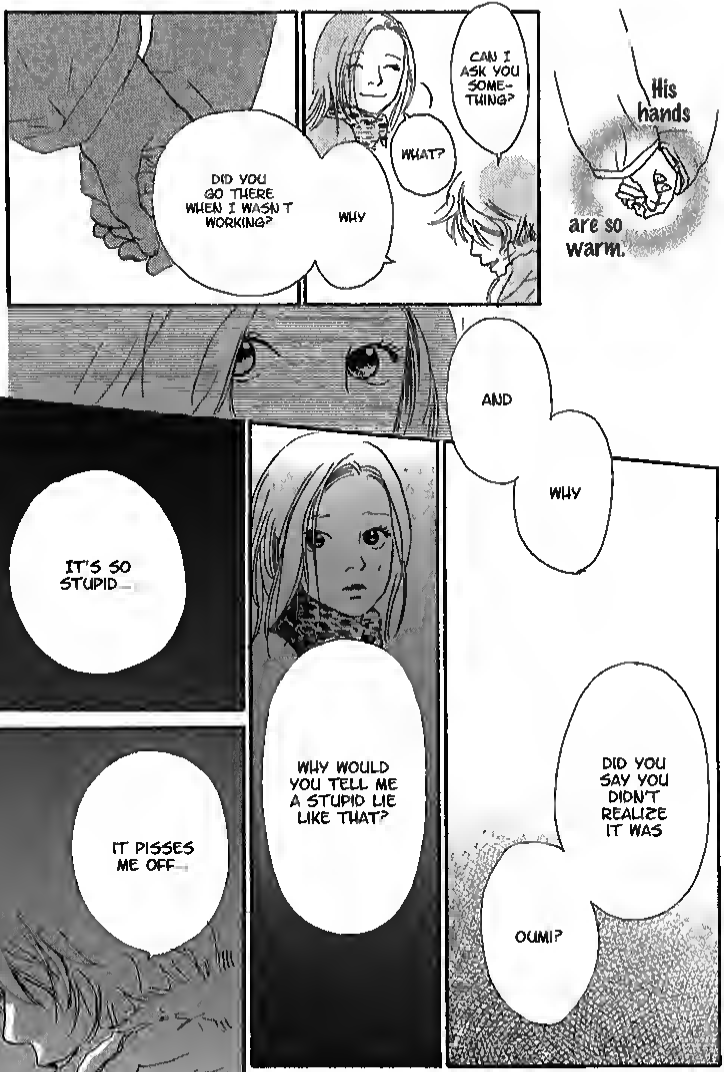

YEAH, I'VE BEEN WORKING HERE FOR A WHILE
YOU DON'T SEEM PANICKED ABOUT IT
BUT I'M PLANNING ON QUITTING SOON
OH
WHAT ABOUT YOU?
AH,
YEAH I'M GOING TO THE LOCAL COLLEGE
OH

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW
"090-XXXXXXXX"
WHEN ARE YOU QUITTING?
YOU'RE SUCH A LOSER.
W-WELL.. WHAT ABOUT YOU THEN?! WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANY-THING?
BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO DISTURB YOU GUYS!
hehe
OKAY
click
beep
beep

Ahahaha
later!
see ya!
hope
HEY, IT'S IHARA!
I THOUGHT WE WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SEE EACH OTHER FOR A WHILE?
YEAH

SURE, LET'S GO TO MICKEY D'S
WANT TO GO SOMEWHERE TO EAT?
Jump?
AH SEE YA
See you, Aki!
THAT'S WHY I THOUGHT THAT WE SHOULD AT LEAST GO HOME TOGETHER!
HOW'S YOUR JOB GOING?
NOT BAD
JUST THE OTHER DAY THOUGH, THIS DRUNK GUY CAME IN AND YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN IT!
HE THREW UP ALL OVER THE PLACE
No way!
YEAH, IT WAS FRIGGIN' DISGUST-ING
I bet
YOUR MOUTH IS LIKE ALL RED
IS IT REALLY ITCHY?
OH, THIS?
I FELL ASLEEP IN CLASS
AND I GUESS MY DROOL JUST KIND OF, DRIED OUT ALL OVER MY MOUTH.
A HA HA HA!
AND WHEN I WOKE UP, THERE WAS DROOL ALL OVER THE PLACE, AND MY NOTES WERE LIKE, SERIOUSLY MESSED UP
A HA HA HA!

プレゼント


CAN I ASK YOU SOME-THING?
WHAT?
DID YOU GO THERE WHEN I WASN'T WORKING?
WHY
His hands are so warm.
AND
WHY
IT'S SO STUPID—
WHY WOULD YOU TELL ME A STUPID LIE LIKE THAT?
DID YOU SAY YOU DIDN'T REALIZE IT WAS
OUMI?
IT PISSES ME OFF—

What happened in the past, is like a book that you've finished reading. Everything's done and over with.
I TOLD HIM I LIKED YOU BACK IN MIDDLE SCHOOL
I THINK IT WAS BECAUSE OF WHAT I TOLD HIM.
WHAT? WHAT'D YOU SAY TO HIM?
HUH?
MY BAD.
AHAHAHA
THAT WE GOT INTO A FIGHT!
AND IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT
YEAH!
YEAH, I GUESS
YEAH

I GOT REALLY DEPRESSED WHEN YOU GOT MAD AT ME.
YOU KNOW,
Even when I get nostalgic for it, and I flip through the pages again, the ending is always the same.
HAHA.
YOU KNOW ... YOU SHOULDN'T KEEP THAT KIND OF STUFF... A SECRET...
Earth to Ami
HELLO? HELLO?
... ...
KAWATA,
DO YOU HAVE TIME TO MEET UP SOMEPLACE?
THERE'S SOMETHING I WANT TO SHOW YOU.

I WANT TO APOLO-GIZE.
FIRST OFF,
AH...
WHEN YOU SAID I GOT MAD AT YOU, YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT THAT TIME, RIGHT?
WELL, IT'S LIKE...
HUH... BUT WHY....
.....
ARGGHH~
I'M THE ONE WHO SHOULD BE EMBARRASSED.
UM ERR...
WAHH!
WAHH!
I CAN'T BELIEVE I SAID THAT TO YOU.
WHO DID I THINK I WAS ANYWAY?
WHY DID I ACT LIKE SOME BIG-SHOT?
"HAVE YOU NO SHAME?"

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO SHOW ME?
RUSTLE
It's Oumi...
Oumi...
"SUGIURA YOSHIKO"
I KEPT IN TOUCH WITH HER BY MAIL
PART WAY THROUGH THOUGH, WE SWITCHED TO TEXT MESSAGING

BUT I CHOSE ALL THE ONES THAT MENTIONED YOU
THIS ISN'T ALL OF WHAT I GOT FROM HER.
RUSTLE
To Ayumi-kun
How are you? It's gotten very cold.
My cat snuggles into my bed everyday.
I haven't gotten much sleep lately.
How is your dog doing?
The dog that our neighbors keep
I'm a year older than everyone else.
I tried my hardest to blend in
but I don't think I---
The other day, someone I used to be classmates with---
SHE...
MENTIONED ME IN HER LETTERS ?
BUT WHY ?
WHY DON'T YOU READ IT AND FIND OUT?

I'm not really that good around people, I don't know,

but my intuition is pretty good, I think, anyway—

I've believed in myself ever since I was a kid. Is that weird?

I couldn't help but think Kawata-san wasn't like the others. I really really wanted to talk to her, but I thought if I went up to her out of the blue, that she might not like that.

One day, I gathered up all my courage to say bye to her, but I messed up.

When I was tending the flower garden during the summer break, Kawata-san came up to me out of nowhere. (You were there for your sports club, remember?) I thought my heart was going to jump right out of my chest. I kept thinking how I should say something, but I couldn't think up of anything interesting to say. Looking back on it now, it's become a precious memory of mine.

Sometimes, at night while I'm lying in bed, I think back to it.

When you got mad that one time,
I really wanted to run away.
I couldn't help but think, "Why me"?

Kawata-san won't even look at me.
I'm really sad. I don't have the courage
to go up and talk to her.

Oumi-kun! I've got a great idea!

I came up with a great idea!

To thank her for helping me fix up the flower garden that someone ruined, I made something for her. Can you guess what it is?

Well it's a-

Ta-da! A case for her glasses! (ala Doraemon!)

I saw how she always put hers in her pocket, so... I'm going to make it with this puffy fabric so that her glasses won't get damaged. Do you think it's a good idea?

I'll use this opportunity
to talk to Kawata-san!

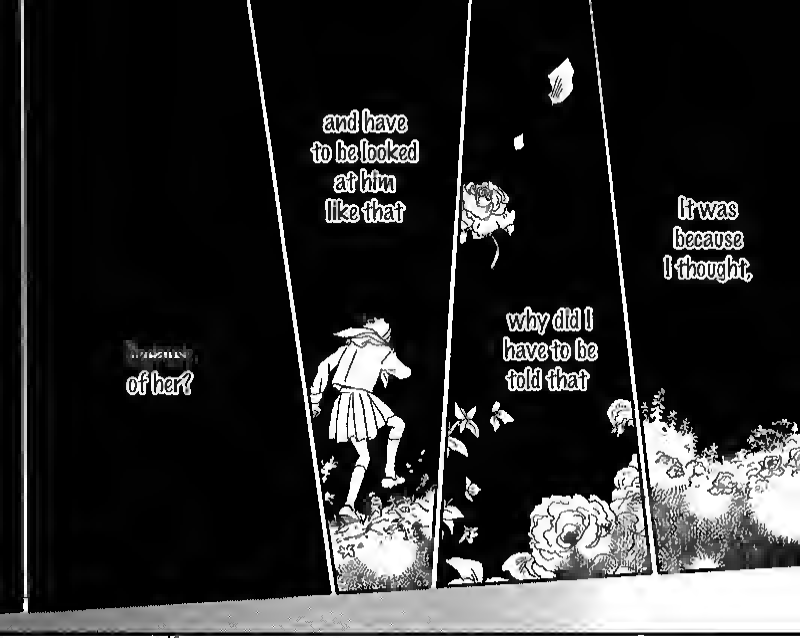
oumi-kun I couldn't do it
I'm scared of the people around her.

I'm scared of being hurt.

If only I was stronger.

WHAT THE HELL IS THAT ANY-WAY...
A "CASE FOR MY GLASSES"?
WHAT A JOKE!
SPLASH
...IF ONLY I WAS STRONGER
I DON'T EVEN WEAR... GLASSES ANYMORE.
SPLASH
SPLASH
THAT IS SO... STU-PID!

WHAT'S HER PROBLEM ANYWAY ...
WHAT'S WRONG WITH HER ...
A "PRECIOUS MEMORY"? HAH!
WHAT DOES SHE KNOW...
SHE DOESN'T KNOW—
AND YOU!
Huh? Me?
AND WHAT'S WITH THIS PENPAL SHIT?
WHAT IS YOUR ...
THIS IS SO STUPID ...
.....
I WAS THE ONE ...
WHO MESSED UP THE FLOWER GARDEN.


and have to be looked at him like that
It was because I thought,
why did I have to be told that
of her?

IT'S BECAUSE
I LIKED YOU...

YEAH...
Ah...
my contact fell out.
...
KAWAT.

LET'S GO SEE SUGIURA TOGETHER NEXT TIME.

When I realized it,

in front of me was Ihara, who had saved up his money to get me a gift for Christmas to make me happy.

I don't know why, but I couldn't accept it. I just couldn't.

Ihara had this serious look on his face for a long time.

And I remembered back to what Ihara had said as a joke a while back.

"JUST BECAUSE YOU ALWAYS GET HOME SAFE DOESN'T MEAN IT WILL BE THE SAME TODAY."

Ihara disappeared from my life.